

Mediterranean diet could protect older adults from becoming frail

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Credit: University College London

Following a Mediterranean diet that is rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and nuts may reduce the risk of frailty in older individuals, according to a UCL-led study.

The findings, which are published today in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, suggest that a diet emphasising plant-based foods and low to moderate amounts of fish and poultry helps keep people healthy and independent as they age. The diet is based on food patterns typical of Greece and Southern Italy in the 1960s.

"People who followed a Mediterranean diet the most were overall less than half as likely to become frail over a nearly four-year period compared with those who followed it the least," said Dr. Kate Walters (UCL Institute of Epidemiology & Health)."

The diet, which also includes low to moderate amounts of wine is low in saturated fat and sugar and has been associated with multiple health

benefits. These include lower incidences of cardiovascular disease, neurodegenerative diseases, diabetes, overall cancer incidence, as well as prolonged survival.

Frailty is common among [older people](#) and its prevalence is increasing as the population ages. Frail older adults may often feel low in energy and have weight loss and weak [muscle strength](#). They are more likely to suffer from numerous health concerns, including falls, fractures, hospitalisation, nursing home placement, disability, dementia, and premature death. Frailty is also associated with a lower quality of life.

The researchers conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of four published studies examining associations between adherence to a Mediterranean diet and development of [frailty](#) in older individuals. Their analysis included 5789 people over 60 living in France, Spain, Italy, and China.

"Nutrition is thought to play a crucial role in developing frailty and we found that the Mediterranean diet may help older individuals maintain muscle strength, activity, weight, and energy levels," added Dr. Kate Walters (UCL Institute of Epidemiology & Health).

"Our study supports the growing body of evidence on the potential health benefits of a Mediterranean diet, in our case for potentially helping older people to stay well as they age," said Dr. Gotaro Kojima (UCL Institute of Epidemiology & Health).

Although older people who followed a Mediterranean diet had a lower risk of becoming frail, it's unclear whether other characteristics of the people who followed this diet may have helped to protect them. "While the studies we included adjusted for many of the major factors that could be associated—for example, their age, gender, social class, smoking, alcohol, how much they exercised,

and how many [health](#) conditions they had—there may be other factors that were not measured and we could not account for," explained Dr. Walters. "We now need large studies that look at whether increasing how much you follow a Mediterranean [diet](#) will reduce your risk of becoming frail."

More information: *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* (2018). DOI: 10.1111/jgs.15251

Provided by University College London

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